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Family structure
Initial findings from the Millennium Cohort Study Age 11 survey

Introduction

The structure of families in the UK is changing. The proportion of families headed by two married parents is declining and the number of unmarried cohabiting parents is on the rise, along with lone parent families. Many children are also experiencing a significant degree of family instability as parents split, form new partnerships or remarry. Consequently, there has been growing concern over the impact that instability and 'non-traditional' family structures may have on the development and wellbeing of children and young people.

This briefing describes the structure of families in the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) when the cohort children were aged 11. It also investigates changes in family structure over the cohort members' first 11 years, using the earlier surveys at ages 9 months, 3, 5 and 7 years. The wealth of information produced by the MCS allows us to describe the characteristics of children who are likely to experience family instability. We explore whether living in different types of family has any impact on the MCS children's happiness, weight and behaviour.

MCS Age 11 survey

The Millennium Cohort Study's (MCS) survey of 11-year-olds took place between January 2012 and February 2013. Trained fieldworkers conducted 13,287 interviews with the children and their parents/guardians. Data from this survey and previous MCS surveys are available to download from the UK Data Service.

Key findings

- Nearly four in ten children had experienced some form of family disruption by age 11.

- The number of families that included both natural parents decreased from 85 per cent at age 9 months, to 61 per cent at age 11.

- By age 11, 50 per cent of children were living with two natural parents who were married.

- More than one in four (26%) children were living with a lone parent at age 11, while 12 per cent were in families that included a step-parent.

- Families that have always included two natural parents are more likely to have older mothers and more educated parents. Children in these families are the least likely to experience poverty[1] at age 11.

- Children from two-natural-parent families are the least likely to have behavioural problems, judging by parent reports. Such problems are more common for children in lone parent and step-parent families.

[1] The MCS uses a standard indicator of 'poverty' – income (adjusted for household size) that is below 60 per cent of the national median.

Findings

Family structure

The term 'family structure' refers not only to the individuals who make up a family unit but the relationships between them. The MCS children's families may include legally married natural parents, cohabiting natural parents, single parents, step-parents, guardians or carers, as well as siblings. Most MCS children also have extended family structures. This briefing, however, focuses on the cohort members' immediate family: their parental figures and their siblings.

The research described here initially looked at cohort members' family structure at age 11 and then considered whether – and how – families had changed from one MCS survey to another (surveys were also conducted at age 9 months, 3, 5 and 7 years). Looking at change in family structure over time, the distinction was made between five main patterns:

- Families with two natural parents at all surveys.
- Families that started with two natural parents but were headed by lone parents by the Age 11 survey.
- Families that had a lone parent at all surveys.
- 'Blended' or step-parent families (i.e. a natural parent and their partner) at age 11. Some children in this family type had also been in blended families at previous surveys while others had been in two-natural-parent or lone parent family groups or had not been living with their natural parents.
- Families with no natural parents present at age 11. A few of these children had also been living apart from their parents at previous surveys but some had been in other types of families.

Changes in structure

This briefing does not document the full extent of family changes during the cohort children's first 11 years. For example, a family might have been headed by a lone parent when a child was aged 7 and again at age 11, but between surveys the family might have gained and lost a step-parent.

However, what we can say is that across the five surveys, 64 per cent of families appear to have experienced no change in their structure. Twenty-one per cent had only one change. A minority of families had more unstable family structures, with 14 per cent experiencing two or more changes.

The MCS cohort members predominantly lived with both natural parents at each survey, although the proportion of families with two natural parents reduced from 85 per cent at age 9 months to 61 per cent at age 11. The number of families with two natural parents who were married, rather than cohabiting, decreased from 60 per cent at age 9 months to 50 per cent at age 11 (Figure 1). Although some cohabiting parents got married over this period, a significant number of marriages also ended.

At age 9 months, only 15 per cent of MCS families were headed by a lone parent. By age 11, this had risen to 26 per cent. Some 1.6 per cent of cohort families were headed by a lone father at the most recent survey.

Twelve per cent of children were in 'blended' or step-parent families by age 11. The majority of step-families were headed by natural mothers and step-fathers. Less than 1 per cent of all MCS families included a natural father with a step-mother figure.

By age 11, about one in a hundred children was not living with either of their natural parents. Children who were in these 'other' family structures were often living with grandparents or other relatives or were in foster care. The number of families in this category has increased over time but has always been small.

When we compare MCS children at age 11 to the National Child Development Study (NCDS) cohort born in 1958, we see clear differences. The NCDS children were brought up in much more stable families: nearly 90 per cent lived with both of their natural parents at age 11, only 6 per cent were in lone parent families, 3 per cent in blended families and 2 per cent in 'other' family types (including adoptive ones).

> 'About 1 in 100 children was not living with either of their natural parents.'
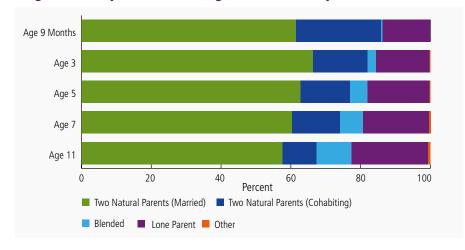
Siblings

At age 11, the cohort members had 1.6 siblings on average (1.3 natural siblings and 0.3 half-siblings). Around 12 per cent of the MCS children had no siblings at this age and 18 per cent had three or more. There was also a very small number living with step-siblings, mainly in blended families.

Characteristics of different family structures

The research also examined the association between the different family structures and other characteristics of the cohort members and their families:

- Children with younger mothers, who were in their teens and early twenties when the cohort child was born, were less likely than those with older mothers to be living in a two-natural-parent family at age 11.

- More educated parents (e.g. those with degree-level qualifications) were more likely to be in two-natural-parent families.

- Ethnic groups[2] have quite distinct family structure profiles. At age 11, South Asian children were the most likely to be living with both natural parents (Indian, 87%;

▶ **Figure 1: Family structure from age 9 months to 11 years**

Legend:
- Two Natural Parents (Married)
- Two Natural Parents (Cohabiting)
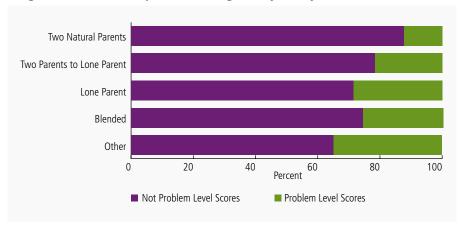- Blended
- Lone Parent
- Other

Bangladeshi, 86%; and Pakistani, 83%), who were usually married. Black children were the least likely to be in two-natural-parent families (Black Caribbean, 30%, and Black African, 50%).

- Black Caribbean children were the most likely (61%) to be living in lone parent families at age 11. Just over one in four White children (26%) were being brought up by lone parents at this age, but only 9 per cent of Indian and Bangladeshi children.

- Only 14 per cent of families with two natural parents were living in poverty at age 11, whereas more than half (53%) of consistently lone parent families had incomes at or below the poverty line. Formerly partnered lone parents also had higher poverty rates (26%) than two-natural-parent families, and blended families had the second highest rate of poverty (32%).

- Families with two natural parents were most likely to be home owners (77%). The most common housing tenure for the other family types was social renting (i.e. renting from a local authority or a housing association). Sixty-five per cent of lone parents, 40 per cent of formerly partnered lone parents, and 36 per cent of blended families were social renters.

Family structure and wellbeing
There are keen debates about whether family structure itself influences child wellbeing. This research therefore

▶ **Figure 2: Behavioural problems at age 11 by family structure**

Figure 2: Behavioural problems at age 11 by family structure. Bar chart showing Percent (0–100) by family structure (Two Natural Parents, Two Parents to Lone Parent, Lone Parent, Blended, Other) split between Not Problem Level Scores and Problem Level Scores.

explored the association between family structure and three childhood outcomes at age 11: weight, happiness and behaviour. We also considered whether any associations that were found could be accounted for by other demographic and socio-economic differences between families (e.g. ethnic group, mother's age, parental education, poverty).

> '**More than half of 'consistently lone parent' families were living below the poverty line.**'

Weight: A higher proportion of cohort members in lone parent families (40%) were overweight than in two-parent families (34%). However, further analyses revealed that these differences were accounted for largely by the demographic

and socio-economic differences between these family types.

Happiness: Children were also asked how happy they were with different aspects of their life. When asked how they felt about their family, 75 per cent said they were 'completely happy'. There were only small differences in happiness levels between different family types.

Behaviour: Cohort members' parents completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire[3], which identifies children with behavioural problems. Analysis of these questionnaire responses suggests that cohort members in two-natural-parent families were least likely (12%) to pose behavioural problems (Figure 2) while the small group of children not living with either of their natural parents were most likely (35%) to have such difficulties. After taking into account other family characteristics, the relationship between family structure and behavioural problems remains.

Conclusions

Although the MCS children experienced multiple family forms, the majority of them were living with both of their natural parents at age 11. However, nearly two in five had lived through some form of family disruption by age 11. The MCS children have experienced much more change in family structure than

previous generations of children, who were more likely to be brought up in stable two-parent families.

Looking at the associations between family structure and children's development and wellbeing the results are mixed. The differences in childhood

weight between family structures could be accounted for by other characteristics of the family. There were only small differences in how happy the cohort members were with their family. There was an association between family structure and the likelihood that a child will present behaviour problems.

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[2] In this briefing paper we employ Census categories, e.g. White, Mixed, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi used by the Office for National Statistics. Black Caribbean and Black African are included in a single category, Black groups.

[3] The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a standard set of questions that was completed by parents. It consists of five subscales: conduct problems, hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, peer problems and pro-social behaviour. The scales can be added to produce a 'Total Difficulties' score. For more details see Goodman, R. (1997) The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a research note, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry,* 38(5), 581-586.

Future research

The research described here has focused on a series of snapshots of cohort members' families taken at each of the five MCS surveys. Additional changes in individual families' structure could have occurred between these surveys – and could indicate increased instability for certain cohort members – but are not recorded in this briefing. Retrospective reports are available that would allow researchers to analyse detailed sequences of family structure.

The longitudinal design of MCS also permits more sophisticated analysis of the impact of changes in family structure on cohort members' lives. Research of this kind could look at how any changes in family structure might have affected the many repeated measures of childhood outcomes that this study has captured (e.g. cognitive test scores).

Future research could also investigate the role of non-resident parents, and the extended family, in cohort members' lives.

About the Millennium Cohort Study

The Millennium Cohort Study is following around 19,000 children born in the UK between September 2000 and January 2002. The study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and government departments, and is managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education, London.

The five surveys of cohort members conducted so far – at ages 9 months and 3, 5, 7 and 11 years – have built up a uniquely detailed portrait of the children of the new century. The study has collected information on diverse aspects of their lives, including behaviour, cognitive development, health, schooling, housing and parents' employment and education.

The MCS has had a significant impact on UK policy, in areas such as breastfeeding, immunisation and child poverty. It will continue to provide a vital source of evidence for policymakers addressing social challenges for many years to come.

Further information

The material in this briefing has been drawn from Connelly, R., Joshi, H and Rosenberg, R. (2014) Family Structure. In Platt, L. (ed) *Millennium Cohort Study Age 11 Survey Initial Findings*. London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

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